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Contingent Coping? Renegotiating ‘Fast’ Disciplinary Social Policy at Street Level: Implementing the UK Troubled Families Programme

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Abstract

This paper reports on a study of local implementation in the UK Troubled Families Programme (TFP). Exploring the experiences of 12 families, the policies of local bureaucrats, and a critical reading of the literature, we argue that the local case represented an attempt to partially renegotiate disciplinary elements of the national programme and to recognise that the families were affected by structural poverty and inequality. Locating the TFP in the literature on disciplinary social policy, multi-scale ‘Fast Policy’ and the potential for local subversion through the agency of frontline workers, we suggest that that local attempts to renegotiate programme priorities were partially successful. These attempts were characteristic of ‘contingent coping’ in terms both of institutional processes and outcomes for the families involved. The evidence reported is significant and timely in the context of the expanded and relaunched TFP and this shapes our commentary on the recently published *Improving Lives* strategy.

Keywords: Discipline, Poverty, Inequality, Troubled Families, Street-Level bureaucrats, subversion.

Introduction

In April 2017 it was announced that the UK Troubled Families Programme (TFP) would be renewed and expanded. This was among a number of policy announcements and papers that replaced the delayed ‘Life Chances Strategy’ which David Cameron had planned to publish after the EU Referendum. The unexpected referendum result, as well as Cameron’s resignation meant that the Life Chances Strategy was superseded by these other announcements which also included funding and structures for 12 ‘Opportunity Areas’; several Green Papers; a White Paper on housing and the new *Improving Lives* strategy (DWP, 2017). It is therefore timely to revisit the TFP in the light of the new evidence of implementation reported in this paper, and to use this to reflect on the approach set out in *Improving Lives*.

Earlier iterations of the TFP have received a great deal of negative academic critique (Crossley and Lambert, 2017; Lambert and Crossley, 2017) and the announcement of its renewal/expansion was met by further criticism. We review the literature on the TFP and *Improving Lives* which aims to place the

programme on a firmer evidential foundation than its predecessors. It does so in the context of a study of TFP implementation in one small unitary authority. Exploring the experiences of 12 families, the policies of local bureaucrats, and a critical reading of the literature, we argue that while the relaunched TFP may offer some help in enabling services to come together to assist families in coping with problems in the short-term, it is not equipped to deal with the structural problems of poverty and inequality themselves. We argue that the present policies remain a ‘Fast Policy’ response to the systemic characteristic of competitiveness at a more global scale. Even where well meaning, dedicated and resourceful public policy professionals renegotiate disciplinary elements in solidaristic ways, this remains, at best, a mechanism for ‘contingent coping’ for those most negatively affected by inequality and poverty.

We begin by describing the TFP and locating it in a critique of ‘disciplinary social policy’ and its implementation. The discussion is couched in terms of understanding the intersection between structural pressures arising from global scale processes of competitiveness in world market integration and local processes of imperfect implementation. We draw attention to the ways in which local bureaucrats become defacto policy makers as they attempt to tailor policies to meet localised contexts and overcome inherent contradictions, sometimes explicitly aiming to change the policy content intended by state-scale policy makers. The discussion then illustrates these themes through reporting the data, methods and findings of our local (anonymised) implementation study. Finally, we return to the *Improving Lives* strategy in order to assess whether the revised programme is likely to overcome the challenges we identify.

Our discussion contributes to the academic literature on the TFP itself, as well as the wider discussion of neo-liberalisation through ‘Fast Policy’ and the social policy literature on local level subversion of national policy objectives. The discussion is relevant to understanding the ways that attempts at local scale subversion and adaptation are constrained by more macro-scale political and economic forces but also how macro- and local scale dynamics interact to produce often unintended policy and social outcomes. The novel contribution of the paper is particularly focussed on how policy subversion might arise from simple processes of day-to-day coping, both on the part of frontline policy implementers and vulnerable populations who are often the target for disciplinary social policy.

The Troubled Families Programme within a Disciplinary Social Policy

The initial version of the TFP was launched in 2012, against the backdrop of the London Riots, a year earlier. Then Prime Minister Cameron made several speeches linking the riots to social problems and ‘problem families’, arguing that:

“...if we want to have any hope of mending our broken society, family and parenting is where we’ve got to start...for years we’ve had a system that encourages the worst in people – that

incites laziness, that excuses bad behaviour, that erodes self-discipline, that discourages hard work, above all that drains responsibility away from people. We talk about moral hazard in our financial system... well this is moral hazard in our welfare system – people thinking they can be as irresponsible as they like because the state will always bail them out... we've known for years that a relatively small number of families are the source of a large proportion of the problems in society. Drug addiction. Alcohol abuse. Crime. A culture of disruption and irresponsibility that cascades through generations." (quoted in Crossley and Lambert, 2017:81–2).

The TFP selected 'troubled families' on the grounds that they met three from four criteria: they were involved in youth crime or anti-social behaviour; children were regularly not attending school; adults on out of work benefits or they caused high costs to the tax payer. The revised programme, operational from 2015, had slightly different selection processes; families would have to meet two of six criteria: parents and children involved in crime; children not attending school; children who need help; adults out of work or at risk of financial exclusion and young people at risk of 'worklessness' (as government used the term); families affected by domestic violence and abuse; parents and children with a range of health problems.

The operational logic was that by identifying and targeting support at these troubled families the high costs of services that they consume (the government claimed there were 120,000 'troubled families' costing the tax payer £9bn a year (DWP, 2012:2)) could be reduced and cycles of inter-generational problem behaviour and 'worklessness' could be 'turned around' (in the language of the programme itself). From the outset, critics warned that families were largely targeted for their poverty and were assumed to be problematic, without sufficient evidence of the relationship between deprivation and 'problem behaviour', or of the effectiveness of family intervention policies (Fletcher *et al.*, 2012; Gillies, 2013; Levitas, 2012; Portes, 2016). They also argued that the 120,000 and £9bn figures were a fiction, unsupported by any reasonable interrogation of the evidence and serving the purpose of vindicating a rhetorical elision of families with multiple problems with families who cause trouble for wider society, and tax payers in particular. The 120,000 figure was an extrapolation from the Families and Children Survey some 7 years earlier which had found (on the basis of a reasonably small sample) that 2% of families experienced multiple factors of deprivation. Critics pointed out that whether or not that 2% figure could be scaled-up to provide a reliable picture of the whole society or whether it was still relevant in 2011, the TFP narrative, took the unfounded additional step of equating these families with troubled or troubling behaviour (Gillies, 2013; Levitas, 2012).

Since the programme operated on a 'payments-by-results' system – the then new fad in welfare programme design – Local Authorities would have an incentive to target support at these families, in order to collect the payments for 'turning around' the families and this could be financed from later savings (Bawden, 2016). Turning around a troubled family included metrics against the selection criteria (measured improvements in children's behaviour in relation to school attendance; anti-social

behaviour and/or criminality; or adults moving from benefits into work) all of which were to be measured over six months. The logic here was that the quasi-market established by the policy would reward public service delivery, and the tax payer would benefit. However, the metrics were designed in such a way as small improvements could trigger payments and families who simply became ineligible for the programme (for instance when the youngest child reached 16) also appeared to constitute ‘turn around’ outcomes. *The Guardian* newspaper found evidence that 8,000 families across Britain were ‘turned around’ without any intervention whatsoever – Local Authorities claimed payments on the basis of working with data to identify families who might have qualified but who no longer met the criteria – and hence could be counted for outcome payments (Bawden, 2015).

The BBC Radio 4 (2014) programme *More or Less*, highlighted that ‘successful’ outcomes associated with minor improvements also resulted in ineligibility for the programme in the future, on the grounds that otherwise Local Authorities could claim repeat attachment and outcome payments for ‘treating’ the same family. This is despite the rather obvious observation that families who experience multiple problems might experience small improvements at one point in time before being affected by further problems in the future.

Despite all this, the senior civil servant behind the programme Louise Casey and the Prime Minister himself (DCLG, 2015) continuously claimed that the programme was a success both in generating savings and in improving the lives of families, relying on the data produced by Local Authorities claiming the results payments (Crossley, 2015). When it was finally released, the independent National Evaluation of TFP found some positive qualitative evidence that the programme had enabled joined-up and targeted support for some families. However, when it came to actual outcomes, the evaluation was damning:

“The key finding from the analysis of administrative data ... across a wide range of outcomes, we were unable to find consistent evidence that the Troubled Families Programme had any significant or systematic impact ... our analysis found no impact on these outcomes attributable to the programme [after] 12 to 18 months.” (Day et al., 2016).

The literature on the TFP treats it largely as one of the latest iterations of neo-liberalising and disciplinary social policy interventions (Gillies, 2013, 2014; Levitas, 2012; Sayer, 2017). Here we refer to neo-liberalisation as being an open and contested process which involves common global scale tendencies to facilitate economic competition between units whether these be states, regions, cities or, indeed, households. However, these common tendencies are subject to localised and contingent processes of negotiation and implementation, rendering patterned yet path-dependent localised outcomes (Brenner *et al.*, 2010a, 2010b) in the search for competitiveness. These processes involve strategies which are both ideological and material; consensual and coercive. It is commonplace to think of social policy within neo-liberalisation processes as increasingly disciplinary and punitive, combining

state coercion with ongoing economic and social restructuring (Dobson, 2015:689; Wacquant, 2001, 2010).

Such, an alignment of disciplinary social policy with broader processes of state-driven economic restructuring are nothing new. Attempts to demonise and restructure various iterations of an ‘underclass’ date at least to the industrial revolution (Welshman, 2017). Macnicol argues that the TFP is largely a continuation of this theme, which has had a particular character in the ongoing processes of neo-liberalisation since the 1980s; such as rendering unemployment and economic disadvantage as a behavioural condition (Macnicol, 1987; 2017). The work of feminists (Mies, 2014; Federici, 2005, 2012; Montgomerie and Tepe-Belfrage, 2016; Parr and Nixon, 2008; Roberts, 2017) shows that women and children have frequently been targeted as part of these disciplinary interventions because of their role in social reproductive processes (Gillies, 2013).

Peck, Brenner and Theodore (Brenner *et al.*, 2010b; Peck, 2002; Peck and Theodore, 2001a; Theodore and Peck, 2001) have drawn attention to the ways in which neo-liberalisation is implemented in multi-scale processes of ‘Fast Policy’ development. Here, scales are dynamically evolving, contested and historically and socially specific. While Jessop (2012:202) claims that the global scale of world market integration is ‘ecologically dominant’, and Peck *et al.* identify common tendencies – of marketization, out-sourcing, privatisation, workfarism etc. – these are remade at subordinate scales so that policies with similar neo-liberalising content often take a variety of superficial forms. It is the systemic property of competitiveness at the global scale (Cammack, 2012), that shapes the primary demands of localised coping and implementation at subordinate scales. This is ‘Fast Policy’ in that localised institutional coping involves policy copying, innovation and variation, usually on the basis of relatively superficial and short-run evaluation evidence. These innovations frequently fail, but ‘fail forward’ into further rounds of neo-liberalising innovations. It is no coincidence that ‘worklessness’ is often centre stage in Fast Policy development. In the eyes of policy makers this is a triple problem: it reflects a barrier to absolute growth and relative productivity; it is a fiscal drain; and it challenges the ideological dominance of the reified trope of the hard working family/individual whose household scale striving for productive work creates aggregate competitiveness.

Research has drawn attention to some of the mechanisms by which localised responses to common pressures result in variable outcomes. Local managers and frontline workers interpret policy templates handed to them through the lens of their own shared and individual subjectivities which are shaped by myriad influences and relations to remake policy through delivery (Lipsky, 1980; Barrett and Fudge, 1981). As Brodtkin (2011:i254) puts it “they not only do policy work, but are manifestly responsible for making policy *work*” (emphasis in the original). Several authors have developed a significant focus on the ways that frontline service delivery remakes policy through these processes, often consciously or unconsciously subverting policy intentions at other scales (Barnes and Prior, 2009; Dobson, 2011; 2015), especially where service delivery involves personal and face-to-face interaction between

workers and users (Prior and Barnes, 2011). Such subversions arise from the ways in which frontline workers interpret policy objectives or user needs through the lens of their own subjectivity and agency; the ways service users actively engage with service delivery to change policy outcomes; and how service users reject or contest the ‘need’ around which services are constructed (Prior and Barnes 2011; Prior, 2009). These interactions are dependent on highly contingent factors such as workers’ and users’ individual biographies, political orientations and the organisational and political contexts within which services are delivered and received, meaning that variability is not just present over scale and space, but over time (Dobson, 2011).

Such contingent agency is explicitly noted in the Family Intervention Projects which pre-dated the TFP, where frontline workers attempted to reconcile the disciplinary demands of national policy with their own assessments of the needs of families themselves (Parr and Nixon, 2009). This local scale agency of resistance to global and state scale pressures, might be thought of as ‘coping’ in that it is not always (or only) actively and consciously conceived in the grandiose terms of ‘subversion’ and ‘contestation’. Rather it can also be an outcome of the contingent ways in which frontline workers respond to the various pressures that they and their service users confront. The data we report below suggests considerable variation within local attempts to implement the TFP, including renegotiation of policy priorities along both ideological-material and coercive-consensual continuums. The discussion offers some further evidence of the ways that frontline subversion might reflect ‘contingent coping’ by both frontline workers and service users.

Findings: Implementing the Troubled Families Programme

Wider Evidence

Several authors have focussed on the varied implementation of the TFP. Nunn and Tepe-Belfrage (2017) report interviews with Programme Managers which emphasised consistencies between national disciplinary discourse and the assumptions present among managers implementing the programme. Wenham’s (2017) study of families in the TFP also emphasised the causes of these troubles as being related to poverty and disadvantage but, contrary to the policy discourse of this leading to troubling behaviour, she stresses how this often resulted in a failure to cope and mental illness. She shows that parents and young people sometimes greatly appreciated the supportive efforts of key workers to help them cope with periods of difficulty associated with bereavement, drug or alcohol abuse. That said, her findings echoed higher level and more abstract concerns about the way the TFP encouraged local authorities to mark families as ‘turned around’ and the loss of support that this generated, suggesting that this absence of further intervention was itself ‘troubling’.

These findings suggest a dissonance between state-scale interpretations of social problems and those held by families subject to intervention, but they also hint at an adaptation of policy focus and content

at the point of delivery. Frontline workers appear to offset disciplinary pressures, reinventing them as supportive measures, albeit within the structural confines of what is possible within the TFP. Similarly, Hayden and Jenkins (2014) found that several authorities sought to adapt the TFP, renaming their local version of the programme, obscuring the connection to the TFP funding mechanism and clearly articulating ‘troubles’ as being structurally related to poverty, rather than family choices and behaviour. Bond-Taylor (2017) recognises the programme level disciplinary discourse, but even there finds some evidence that an ethics of care was present in the TFP to the extent that the programme was intended to look at family troubles “from the inside out” and to offer bespoke commitments to support individual families. Key workers were encouraged not just to intervene with families but to support them in detailed day-to-day activities in order to help families cope.

The discussion that follows first reports data and findings from one study of a TFP programme in a small city. It draws out many of the more abstract themes in the discussion so far, with a particular emphasis on the ways in which the TFP was renegotiated and adapted as it was applied, but also how local implementation suffered from the central weaknesses of the TFP at the scale of policy content and programme design. It then goes on to assess the relaunch of the TFP in April 2017 against the debates reported above and the empirical findings below.

The ‘Supporting Families’ Programme

The local TFP in our case City fell under the remit of the Children and Young Person’s Directorate of the Unitary Authority, steered by a multi-agency Strategic Group with members recruited from Heads of Service for a range of stakeholder partnership agencies (including youth offending, health, police, adult services, the Arms-Length Management Organisation for housing, and probation). The group took the decision from the outset to rename the programme with a more positive title than the TFP, in recognition of the negative connotations of the term ‘Troubled’ and acknowledgement of the multidimensional complexities and level of need many families in the locality experienced. We anonymise this more positive programme title here as Supporting Families (SF).

The SF model operated on three ‘tiers’; those prescribed ‘low level’ intervention were families who met 2 out of the 3 national programme criteria and the programme followed a ‘business as usual’ approach – i.e. they would be badged under the SF scheme but would not see any difference in delivery, continuing to receive support with an existing worker but that worker could tap into extra resources for a 3-6 month period. While we have no clear evidence of gaming behaviour here, this is characteristic of a data exercise to claim outcome payments without additional interventions being in place. ‘Medium’ intervention families would be required to meet two out of three core criteria in addition to a local discretionary criteria including domestic violence, mental health and those requiring early help; and could be worked with through multi-agency teams (e.g. Youth Offender Service (YOS), Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS)) and receive a bespoke intervention for between 6-9

months. For the most intensive level, families needed to have met all three core criteria and demonstrate challenging behaviour with a multitude of issues requiring an intense and persistent contact. These families could be worked with for up to 12 months and would require an SF worker; the original job specification which asked for individuals: *‘to work intensely with a small caseload of families to achieve and sustain family change looking at the family from the inside out to understand its dynamics as a whole and to offer practical help and support’*.

The model of using an intensive SF worker to engage the ‘hard to reach’ was one that had already been tried and tested under the Family Intervention Project. However, FIPs were located within a single directorate – housing and anti-social behaviour and a review determined that workers needed to be integrated into the local Multi-Agency Teams across the City in order to facilitate information sharing and better joint working practices.

The Intensive SF Workers were based across four different localities and one was situated in the Youth Offending Team. All of these workers had supervision from their respective team managers and came together on a monthly basis as a discrete team to discuss workforce development and share good practice. An Operational Group comprising managers of frontline workers and core stakeholders met on a regular basis to consider day-to-day issues, overseen by the multi-agency Strategic Group.

Targeting Families and the ‘Trouble’ with not coping

Families were targeted through two main routes – during the earlier stages of the programme this came from trawls of open cases with partner agencies to extract those that matched the three criteria. This proved problematic as the data was often incomplete or unclear. The second route was by nomination, primarily triggered by a referral into the Multi-Agency Team and, although other agencies could nominate a family into the programme, Children and Young People were responsible for the majority of cases. This was perhaps symptomatic of a lack of ‘Thinking Family’ more widely.

The research included interviews with 12 ‘case study’ families; the small number of cases and the method of identification by workers as those most likely to engage, suggest caution against generalisability. However, the characteristics of these 12 families demonstrated the multiple and entrenched issues faced, many of which could not be deemed as ‘behavioural’ and impacted significantly upon day-to-day life. As Table 1 shows, they were predominantly affected by poverty; all were unemployed, most lived in social housing, more than half were in rent arrears with most of these being at risk of eviction. Debt and problems with benefits was reported by more than half of the participants who described difficult experiences of benefits being substantially reduced or trying to survive for substantial periods of time without them, in one instance a household was without income for over twelve months. These financial hardships contributed negatively to the overall health and wellbeing of the families who reported living without heating, bedding, furniture and having to resort

to food banks. For two East European families, poverty coexisted alongside what they reported to be racism in the community, schools and other services.

They were also affected by family breakdown; the majority being lone parents and five of the twelve had a history of domestic violence. Mental health problems and learning difficulties were common. The families were significantly larger than the national average; one was a family with 10 children, three of the families included pregnant daughters under the age of 18, a demographic which traditionally has required more support and is associated with poorer outcomes. Mental health issues and concerns predominated in seventy-five per cent of the cases, with many reporting deeply entrenched problems; two of the mothers had been on anti-depressants for over 15 years, another two suffered with agoraphobia. Long-standing health problems were also reported such as heart attacks, epilepsy, fibroid myalgia, ME, Chronic Fatigue Syndrome and a degenerative spine condition. Clearly these issues would impact upon the ability to work and sometimes to undertake basic household tasks. Where a partner was present, they often undertook the role of carer, placing further limitations on the finances of the family.

Table 1: Characteristics of the Families involved in the Fieldwork

Characteristics	Frequency in the Families
X3 or more children	10/12
Average no. of children	4.4
Lone parent	8/12
Domestic Violence	5/12
No one in work	12/12
Social housing	10/12
SEN	9/12
ADHD	4/12
Mental health problem	9/12
Adult with a long standing serious health problem	5/12
Risk of eviction	6/12
Rent arrears	7/12

It would appear that the households in the research would fit with the Government's assertion that families in the TFP experience on average nine serious problems at any one time which reinforce and affect one another; they experience multiple forms of disadvantage. Behavioural 'troubles' such as alcohol dependency were certainly present, but they overlapped with structural problems such as poverty – the most widely shared experience – and health problems. It is important to acknowledge

that over half of these families had recognised that these wider structural and health problems created challenges, including behavioural responses and that they were struggling to cope with their circumstances. Many had asked for help on numerous occasions but had not received the assistance and support they needed until they were referred into the SF programme. As one family member put it:

“I have been looking for help for so long ... and I kept getting turned back ‘we can’t help you because of this reason’ and then you know we couldn’t get any help that way so we were really struggling.” Family 3: Jenny, mother of three.

Renegotiating Disciplinary Priorities on the street

If renaming the programme at local scale reflected a symbolic desire to contest the national programme rhetoric, detailed aspects of implementation showed even more micro-scale attempts to renegotiate priorities. The research found that an important factor in programme successes related to the voluntary nature of participation and key to securing that was seen as the ability of workers to distance themselves from ‘disciplinary’ intent and emphasising a culture of respect toward service users. As one key worker noted:

“The common thread is the respect you have for the person. And I think that if they feel that you haven’t got that respect for them or they feel that you are looking down on them, your job becomes ten times harder. So that’s what gets me along and gets me in the front door, it’s just about respect, treating them like real people and not cases.” Intensive SF Worker (IFSW) 2: Zoe

This was appreciated by the families themselves. Several reported that they were initially suspicious but that IFSW’s focus on support and respect helped them to engage with the support being offered.

“I see her as part of the furniture now, she doesn’t act like a professional, it’s like your mate coming round and helping. I mean the state of the house when she first came round, it was shocking, it was terrible but she didn’t once make me feel belittled or anything like that.” Family 3: Rachel, mother of four.

There was considerable evidence of key workers using the freedom available to them within the programme to innovate at the point of service delivery to meet family needs. They had access to a credit card which could be used to purchase key items to address ‘immediate household needs’. The ways that they did so did not ignore the rhetorical emphasis of the national TFP focus on behaviour, but involved a much more nuanced approach to understanding and interpreting family need and the causes of behavioural problems. How the workers used this money varied. One use relied on more traditional ‘youth worker’ approaches to develop engagement and build relationships. As one SF worker noted:

‘Sometimes if you can take someone to McDonalds and that is where they will talk to you then you’ve got to do it. I use the card for that, so it is quite useful and it is amazing how much people’s tongues loosen up over a piece of cake’. ISFW 11: Abdullah

Managers had encouraged key workers to make full use of the discretionary funding (up to £2,000) available to support families by purchasing larger items to mitigate the material poverty they faced: “I’ve bought a lot of hoovers. I’ve bought a washing machine. I’ve bought doors” (ISFW-Jason). another suggested that: “I believe if the kid needs a bed then they get a bed” (ISFW 2:Zoe).

Key workers also tried to help families access the full range of statutory and other support available to them, to mitigate – but not resolve – urgent material poverty, combining this with the short-term financial support available through the SF programme. They tried to meet everyday needs, before being able to focus on the superficial behavioural problems which triggered inclusion in the programme in the first place:

“Some of my cases have had to go to food banks. They still go now. I’ve told them how to access them as they haven’t had anything, they’ve not been able to feed themselves, so for me to be able to do a Morrison’s shop for them, that’s a big thing”. ISFW 6:Debbie.

“This kid wasn’t going to school, he wasn’t attending, it turned out that he didn’t have a uniform that fitted and a pair of shoes. Twenty quid at Asda, job done”. IFSW 12:Keisha

But as one family noted, neither discretionary budgets or statutory services provided enough help to deal with material poverty. They reported that their key worker had helped them to develop more ‘sustainable’ behaviour *via* reliance on charitable services:

“She’s been taking me to the Jubilee Project in ...[the] church. We’ve been for about the last five weeks and we can get food parcels and stuff because they stopped my benefits, because I was late signing on and the reason I gave wasn’t good enough so I got hardship, half the amount I usually got, so I was getting into a bit of a mess with that.” Family 8:Mary, mother of one.

In these mundane ways, SF workers renegotiated the discipline in the TFP policy agenda. Faced with the realities of structural poverty and the ways that this generates proxy indicators of troublesome behaviour – such as truancy – the workers opted to mitigate the material reality of poverty. They tried to ‘make the policy work’ in piecemeal fashion by mitigating need. This Fast Policy adaptation must be understood though in the context of multi-scale contradictions in policy reform. SF workers’ ‘innovations’ in this regard related to other aspects of institutional and policy reform. Many of the needs addressed through their use of the Flexible Needs Budget might previously have been met by the use of ‘Emergency Budgets’ previously held by other statutory services. These services have experienced severe budget cuts under austerity-enforced local state retrenchment. In this instance then, an apparently ‘innovative’ and time limited national programme is renegotiated at the local level to

address needs previously met by other statutory services which had been withdrawn under neo-liberalising reform. National programmes and local adaptation are needed because of wider reforms. Contingent coping in this regard is an institutional process as well as a service delivery outcome.

The strikingly and sickeningly obvious point is that despite the programme rhetoric of ‘turnaround’, none of this deals long-term with the structural reality of poverty and extreme need. In one of the largest and most prosperous economies of the world, the SF was providing short-term alleviation of hunger for families who had exhausted all other avenues. Our respondents were generally positive about the case-closure process and reported flexibility to re-engage with families during a time limited period after intervention. But they also noted concerns that the changes they helped to secure were not always likely to be permanent or that they were highly contingent:

“Sometimes it has got to be ‘what is good enough for them, for that family?’ We have to recognise that they are never going to be the Waltons. It’s inevitable that they are going to face difficult situations but it is how they deal with it that’s the difference.” ISFW 5 – Jason.

“With that family I wasn’t happy, because I didn’t feel we had achieved enough outcomes. It was slightly safer and slightly better, but I still think about the kids. But, because the parents wouldn’t engage and we were going backwards and forwards, I have thought about them and think oh god I hope that they are alright.” ISFW 4 – Karen.

Far from needing targeting for behavioural intervention, many families had repeatedly requested support and now they were receiving it from the SF on a time-limited basis. For all that they renegotiated the programme priorities, SF workers were only able to help families cope with poverty while they were in the programme. The structural causes of poverty were beyond their remit. Even if they were successful in helping a family to cope for long-enough that they could start the long-journey out of poverty, that would do nothing about the conditions which create poverty overall. As such, in innovative, time-limited, heavily targeted and local scale interventions such as the TFP, success is always contingent. They can help some families cope for a while with structural conditions generated at other scales. They might at best be able to influence who experiences the worst affects of this by helping some families to escape extreme poverty and develop long-term coping mechanisms, but they can’t do away with higher-scale systemic characteristics. Even where local subversion successfully renegotiates the discipline of state-scale policy, this is constrained to a process of ‘contingent coping’ with the pressures of competition in the world market.

None of that is to ignore the fact that material deprivation is sometimes combined with the experience of ‘troubled’ behaviour. And that troubled behaviour can, in turn, accentuate the material experience of poverty so that the options even to mitigate it were reduced. This too was a complex problem that SF workers needed to confront and negotiate. As such, one worker spoke about caution against utilising the budget flexibility available to them for reimbursement of what they viewed to be the result of problematic behaviour:

“If they need a new bed or new doors because the kids keep on breaking the beds and the doors, then buying new ones isn’t really the answer is it?” ISFW 7:Kashwa.

These disciplinary orientations were outbalanced by more supportive elements, but still present. They also involved not just renegotiation of programme policy content but of service user behaviour, reflecting moral commitments among the workers but often interpreted in the best interests of the families. So one worker did make reference to the commonly mentioned threat in relation to family intervention – removal of children – but did so in a way that she saw this ‘threat’ as used in the context of also providing and encouraging the take-up of support in the collective interests of the family:

“But if it’s something like the Mum’s an alcoholic, there are obviously reasons she’s an alcoholic and so she needs support. And she needs to be told as well, ‘if you don’t get help, you’ll have your kids taken away’. They will be separated, so they need to know the knock-on effect.” ISFW 2:Zoe.

This illustrates Dobson’s (2011) findings that even workers who consciously renegotiate disciplinary elements will resort to these where ‘individual’ factors such as their own internal moral orientation and user behaviour push them in that direction. Disciplinary content in social policy is not so much purely a national scale imperative which is either accepted or contested by local scale workers, but a much more complex assemblage of relational causality in which the relationships of multiple agencies are significant (Dobson, 2015).

Improving Lives?

The *Improving Lives* Strategy (DWP, 2017) which relaunched the TFP appeared to attempt to establish a dividing line with the criticism that had been earlier levelled at the TFP. The document places a great deal of emphasis on its grounding in evidence and academic advice, and was accompanied by a very detailed evidence and analysis pack, utilising data from the Understanding Society dataset (which replaced the British Household Panel Survey) and Millennium Cohort Study to underpin the analysis. It relies throughout on evidential claims about the association between unemployed parents; parenting conflict; ill health; anxiety, stress and mental health problems; behavioural problems in families (particularly drug and alcohol dependency) and then on constraints on children’s life chances, particularly *via* educational attainment. Undeniable associations between say unemployment and parental conflict or childrens’ educational attainment are repeated, in a way that infers a series of simple causalities. Unemployment causes poor educational attainment, relationship distress, debt and relationship problems and so on. Poor parental mental health causes unemployment and poor outcomes for children. At one level this is all undeniable and presents a welcome acknowledgement of the multi-faceted and complex series of problems faced by some families. But throughout, unemployment is rendered as the much more ‘troubling’ ‘worklessness’ (occurring 61 times in the 27 pages of text, not counting the titles and equally illustrative email address for comments: helpingworklessfamilies@dwp.gsi.gov.uk). This is so significant for neo-liberalising social policy

because while individuals and households experiencing unemployment may still strive to be the exalted hard-working family, the condition of ‘worklessness’ robs the working class of their essential social utility: materially of being able to work and ideologically demonstrating the desire to do so. The narrative and conclusion from this discussion therefore, places paid employment at the apex of the solutions to a web of troubles – the clear message is that enable work, and these complex problems will start to abate, and now Families are ‘Troubled’ and to be targeted because they are ‘workless’. The one paragraph conclusion from this analysis is worth quoting in full to underline the point:

“We need to help families tackle the difficult issues outlined above so that they can get on with their lives. Without help, families who experience major barriers to work will struggle to overcome the problems they face. Parents will struggle to move back into work and stabilise their lives, children will struggle at school and into the future. They will be unable to take advantage of the opportunities in a fairer Britain. In the next chapter we present some policies which will do more to tackle the root causes of some of these profoundly difficult issues.” (DWP, 2017, p14)

The strategy then moves on to discussing a range of policy responses to the problems identified and, in fairness, these cross a range of issues including work, housing, mental health services and schools. The TFP is singled-out as one of the most important ways of tackling these problems and is to have a new emphasis on tackling worklessness and associated issues – especially problem debt and parental conflict. The TFP is praised with the same widely challenged figures of turned around families once again repeated uncritically.

The crux of the matter here is not the quality of the underpinning evidence or that a range of complex social problems might be associated with one another. Rather, all of these problems are equally associated with harm done to people and their relationships by poverty and inequality (Sayer, 2017). Further, while paid employment may offer some a route out of these problems, it is less likely when people are experiencing them. Moreover, given the increased insecurity in the labour market and stagnant pay growth, there is no guarantee that helping people overcome immediate barriers to employment would solve the underpinning problem. The TFP then, even in revamped form, remains a piecemeal, contingent and local coping mechanism for problems generated at a more structural scale (Gillies, 2013).

Conclusion

The discussion above extends the recent academic critique of the TFP to demonstrate its relevance to debates beyond austerity and disciplinary social policy. It does so in three ways. First, by considering one case of TFP implementation. Second, by demonstrating the links between some of the common findings in relation to the TFP (targeted families being subject to poverty and inequality, the efforts of

frontline staff to renegotiate programme priorities to deal with this, potential evidence of gaming in relation to outcome payments) and wider debates about Fast Policy development and the political economy of scale that are inherent in neo-liberalisation. Third, it does so by contributing to the literature on the ways that common means of implementing such neo-liberalisation in social policy open up space for contestation and renegotiation, especially as frontline professionals struggle to ‘make policy work’ by coping with the interaction of structural pressures and service user needs.

Aside from merely illustrating these trends and lines of argument in the wider literature on the TFP, the paper highlights an essential problem for those who seek to contest neo-liberalising or disciplinary trends, whether at the scale of national policy debates and design, or at the scale of local implementation. Where these attempts are successful they are highly circumscribed by wider structural trends. Contrary to some other accounts of TFP implementation, our data suggests local workers were successful in renegotiating disciplinary elements of the TFP in ways that echo findings from earlier studies of similar programmes (Parr and Nixon, 2009). At both a corporate and a frontline scale, the SF marked a partial reconception of the programme as a poverty alleviation mechanism. However, the constraints of the programme mean that, in a wider context of 40 years of neo-liberalisation and post-2010 austerity, their success was only ever likely to lead to ‘contingent coping’. Contingent coping was characteristic both of programme processes *and* outcomes. In relation to the former, the national programme is arguably shaped by the need to cope with the effects of welfare state retrenchment; and local managers and frontline staff used the flexibility available to them to partially replace other services that had been cut back or withdrawn. In the latter, frontline staff helped families cope, at least for a while, with the effects of poverty and inequality, but not resolve these underlying issues, which were often made worse by wider and ongoing neo-liberalisation – such as enhanced welfare conditionality.

To the extent that *Improving Lives* does try to build a more evidence-based approach to the ‘problem’ of ‘troubled families’ at a national programme scale, it does so within this frame of contingent coping. None of that makes engagement with, and renegotiation of, policy at whatever scale a pointless task. Contingent coping may well be preferable to not coping at all. However, evidence based reflection on how social policy is renegotiated through different sites of agency (Dobson, 2011:555) in multi-scale processes, and the limitations inherent in this, is crucial not just to understanding why policy outcomes vary (Prior and Barnes, 2011) but also to how ‘agencies of resistance’ can be best mobilised.

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